

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5703
CHARLES MEDD

APRIL 7, 1978

65 -- NO LONGER TOO OLD

ANNCR:

PRESIDENT CARTER HAS SIGNED A LAW RAISING THE MANDATORY RETIREMENT AGE FOR MOSX AMERICANS FROM 65 TO 70. THE SAME LAW WILL REMOVE COMPULSORY RETIREMENT PROVISIONS FOR ALL BUT A FEW EMPLOYEES OF THE U.S. GOVERNMENT.

VOA'S CHARLES MEDD HAS A BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

IT WAS AN OUTSPOKEN CONGRESSMAN FROM FLORIDA NAMED CLAUDE PEPPER WHO RAISED THE QUESTION, WHAT HAPPENS TO AMERICANS AT 65 THAT SUDDENLY MAKES THEM TOO OLD TO WORK? SINCE THERE WERE NO MEDICAL REASONS TO BE FOUND, THE ANSWER BOILED DOWN TO A COMBINATION OF CUSTOM AND LAW. HISTORIANS TRACED THE IDEA BACK TO THE YEAR 1889 WHEN CHANCELLOR OTTO VON BISMARCK DECIDED 65 WAS THE RIGHT AGE FOR GERMAN WORKERS TO COLLECT PENSIONS. AT THE TIME, CYNICS SUGGESTED THAT BISMARCK BASED HIS DECISION ON THE KNOWLEDGE THAT FEW GERMANS LIVED THAT LONG, BUT THAT IS CLEARLY NOT THE CASE TODAY IN MUCH OF THE INDUSTRIAL WORLD. IN THE UNITED STATES, ALMOST 23 MILLION PEOPLE -- OR ABOUT ONE IN EVERY TEN -- ARE 65 OR OLDER, AND WHILE THE VAST MAJORITY OF THEM MAY ENJOY NOT WORKING, CONGRESSMAN PEPPER WAS CONVINCED THE CHOICE SHOULD BE THEIRS.

WHAT BECAME KNOWN AS THE PEPPER BILL DID NOT MOVE THROUGH CONGRESS WITHOUT OPPOSITION. BOTH BUSINESS AND LABOR ARGUED THAT DELAYING THE MANDATORY RETIREMENT AGE WOULD TEND TO ELIMINATE JOBS FOR YOUNG WORKERS ALREADY SUFFERING FROM HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT. AND THE UNIONS ALSO COMPLAINED THAT THE PROPOSED

LAW WOULD MAKE IT MORE DIFFICULT FOR THEM TO NEGOTIATE PRIVATE PENSIONS WITH EMPLOYERS WHO ARE APT TO SAY THEY ARE NO LONGER NEEDED.

BUT THOSE ARGUMENTS DID NOT STAND UP TO THOSE OF SENIOR CITIZEN GROUPS, CIVIL LIBERTARIANS AND OTHER SUPPORTERS. THEIR MAIN POINT -- COMPULSORY RETIREMENT BASED PURELY ON AGE IS AS MUCH A VIOLATION OF CIVIL RIGHTS AS WOULD BE SIMILAR LAWS BASED ON RACE OR SEX. SUPPORTERS OF THE LEGISLATION ALSO POINTED OUT THAT THE CURRENT TREND IN THIS COUNTRY IS TOWARD EARLY, VOLUNTARY RETIREMENT, SAYING THAT MOST AMERICANS WILL STOP WORKING AS SOON AS THEY ARE ABLE TO DO SO. BUT THE ESSENTIAL POINT, THEY ARGUED, IS THE ELIMINATION OF AN ARBITRARY AGE BARRIER. IN THE END, NOBODY COULD DISPUTE CONGRESSMEN PEPPER WHEN HE SAID: "SOME PERSONS DODDER AT 30, OTHERS AT 80, AND SOME PASS THROUGH LIFE WITHOUT DODDERING AT ALL." CLAUDE PAPPER, AFTER ALL, IS 77 AND HARDLY THE DODDERING TYPE.

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JS/RTD